

FRUIT THAT WILL LAST

By Oum Mark

Following many years of service in the Marseille Media Centre, Oum Mark and her husband moved to North Africa more than ten years ago. From Syrian background, she worked for several years at an Arabic language school, and continues to work with many women and BMBs.

‘I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit-fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other.’ John 15:15 &16

Why did Jesus not stop at the words ‘bear fruit’? Why did he continue by saying ‘fruit that will *last*’? And what is my role in that?

Last week one of my friends accepted Christ. She is someone I have been meeting with regularly for a few months and I saw her change from someone who used to say, ‘Christians are idol worshipers’ to someone who now says, ‘*my religious education teachers used to lie to me. They used to say all sorts of things about Christians that aren’t true. When I read the Bible I found out that Christians worship One God.*’

Of course I rejoice with the angels in heaven because she is saved. Until meeting Christ in a personal way, she had been battling with confusion, guilt and fear. The Holy Spirit convicted her and drew her to Christ. Yet I believe that her journey has only just begun. Although I have been very involved in her life, now my involvement has to go even deeper.

One might ask, ‘Who are we to do this work? After all, isn’t this the work of the Holy Spirit?’ While it is true that we are invited to watch and marvel at the Work of God in the lives of people, his work also happens through us, because our Lord chose to use us to accomplish his work.

The verses quoted at the beginning of this article (John 15:15-16) are the ones that fuel my vision while living in this country (and on the earth). In this passage our Lord Jesus is calling us friends, not because we will share his glory, but because he shared with us what he had learned from the Father. We are partners in his business of bearing fruit.

But it has to be *fruit that will last*! Through the years I have noticed that some of us are satisfied and think that the job is done when someone accepts Christ. That is when we breathe a sigh of relief. Although I strongly believe

that it is the Holy Spirit who changes lives, Jesus spent hours and hours – years – teaching those who believed in him. He also asked us to go and disciple people. If our responsibility stops when someone comes to Christ, it would be like planting a field but then neglecting it. If it is not watered and looked after, if the insects are not dealt with, and the weeds are not pulled out, then the field will not produce healthy lasting fruit! If we want to see *lasting fruit* then we must give greater importance to *discipleship*.

Some of us were brought up in Christian homes, went to Sunday School from infancy, socialised within a church context, attended Christian Union at university and then had Christian weddings. Even growing up in the West today where Christian values are diminishing in influence, the background and thinking is still a lot closer to Christianity in some ways. How many of us read novels based on Christian principles, even if they were not necessarily Christian? At university, most of the classics I read were based on biblical truth. All these elements of our Christian and Western upbringing play an important part in making us who we are, and in shaping our beliefs, values and world view. When we compare those who grew up in Christian contexts with those who grew up in Muslim contexts, we begin to appreciate the importance of intentionally discipling BMBs.

That is why when disciplining a new BMB we need to think about all aspects of life. Theology is important, but in some cases theology is not understood as being a way of living. And with some it ends up being head knowledge only. Sound theology is very important for discipleship. In fact it *must* be the background for everything we teach people and it must be linked and applied in the real life of the person. It must be an equipping tool for life otherwise a BMB might have knowledge but not know how to live as a Christian. BMBs who have not talked and thought through all of their beliefs, principles and values from new biblical perspectives can easily fall into traps. They often find it hard to be active members of church groups.

I once met a couple that had been BMBs for more than ten years. I am not sure how they came to faith, but it was evident that they had not sorted out quite a few things. They had a surprisingly strong fear of people knowing that they were believers. They celebrated every Muslim holiday. They never witnessed, not even to their families. Their view of church was unhealthy and even distorted. Their attitude to money and their dependency on outsiders was the thing that finally caused them to drop out of fellowship and have a negative attitude about the believers around them. Several people tried to help them but sadly, they were no longer open to listening! This was really hard for us to watch. Yet, in a sense it was almost too late because these things had not been dealt with earlier on when they were more receptive to becoming the new creatures in Christ God had intended.

Many BMBs tend to grow fast at the beginning when they are on fire with their first love for the Lord. It is in this early stage when the old man starts dying and the newness of life starts springing up and producing the fruit of righteousness in them. It is in this critical early stage that *thorough* discipling is invaluable in the building up of believers into strong members of the body of Christ. This is what Proverbs 4:1-5 (NIV) says:

Listen, my sons, to a father's instruction; pay attention and gain understanding. I give you sound learning, so do not forsake my teaching. *When I was a boy* in my father's house, *still tender*, and an only child of my mother, he taught me and said, "Lay hold of my words with all your heart; keep my commands and you will live. Get wisdom, get understanding; do not forget my words or swerve from them" (emphasis added).

A young tree can be shaped easily by the wind but once a few years have passed by it is extremely hard to reshape it.

In the country where I live there are few opportunities for an individual to learn the depth of their new faith. It is a culture that does not like books. BMBs cannot learn Christian principles at home (unless they are second generation believers), at school or at work. The churches are led by people who, though they are sometimes able to, most of the time they do not go over basic Christian beliefs and values with each new person that joins. Most leaders or pastors are not trained to disciple. There is no follow-up plan for new believers and so many things fall through the cracks.

What are the things we need to cover when we disciple BMBs? What I found to be necessary are mostly basic things like life versus death, God's will instead of the fatalistic 'maktoub' (it is written), who God is, lies and 'white lies' compared to telling the truth, honesty with time and money work, money, relationships, time and priorities in life, persecution, forgiveness, sin, repentance, giving and taking, superstitions, folk Islam, magic, curses and anger, marriage, children's upbringing and discipline and the acceptance of others. In short, all the basic values and beliefs need to be revisited and reinstalled in the light of the Gospel.

There are many materials for discipleship available. But to teach people all these things, the book I always find myself using is the Bible and all the biblical stories. The truth they hear keeps working in their hearts like yeast in dough. It is thrilling to see the power of the Word of God – the stories of the men and women of old, the teachings and parables of Jesus and the letters to the churches. Every single story is applicable and is there for us to use to teach, correct and build up BMBs.

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If we do not disciple people who is going to do it? I really believe that almost before we start witnessing to someone, we need to have a discipleship plan already in place. If we cannot do it ourselves, then we must ask the Lord to lead us to people who can. It is often hard to give up 'our' contacts for someone else to disciple. We need to accept that we do not necessarily have to disciple them ourselves if they can be discipled better by someone else. This may be hard, but we should make every possible effort to make sure that they are being discipled in a healthy way. As Paul says:

So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labour. For we are God's fellow-workers, (and the BMBs) are God's field, God's building. (1 Cor. 3:7-9, NIV)

Finally, what brings balance to all of the above? From all the years that I have worked with BMBs I have found out that an early introduction and incorporation into a local church is the best environment a new BMB can have in which to grow. When Muslims come to faith everything changes for them. They might lose a lot to gain Jesus and might also feel confused, lost, fearful and alone. But when we who are discipling them love, respect and have faith in the local church, the new believers will see that and will love and trust it too. It will be for them a new family that feels the same way, walks the same road, talks the same heart language and has the same cultural experiences. There they will start feeling a sense of belonging again and will start growing in strength. The link with other BMBs provides an amazing help. They can help and understand each other and often have a strong bond together that we can never offer ourselves.

In conclusion, when we disciple people, one of the major things we need to model and teach is what it means to be a part of the body of Christ. We need to help them understand brotherly love, unity and commitment, and help them find their role in the church group. This is a VERY important part of the lives of new believers. It is the new healthy ground where they can send down roots, grow and continue to be discipled so that the precious new fruit will last.